Alert, alert! Never mind

False report said Russia shot down missile from Norway

By DAVE CARPENTER
ASSOCIATED PRESS

MOSCOW — It's a missile! It's been shot down by the Russians! It's . . . all a mistake?

Yep.

An erroneous report that Russian forces had shot down a missile launched from northern Europe had governments around the world and their militaries asking questions yesterday.

The "missile" turned out to be a NASA-funded rocket that aimed to study the Northern Lights. The Norwegians launched it successfully within their own territory after informing the Russian government. It was not shot down.

The Interfax news agency later acknowledged that its report was wrong. Vyacheslav Terekhov, deputy director of the agency, blamed the mistake on false information from a high-ranking military source.

Following the initial urgent report, Russian government and military officials said they knew nothing about a missile shootdown.

But at a time when Russia's military is embroiled in a bloody war in Chechnya, the report set off widespread alarms.

Spokesmen for NATO, the Pentagon, the Allied military command in Europe, several countries and President Clinton immediately said they were looking into the report. Later, a White House spokesman called it "totally unsubstantiated."

In Oslo, the Norwegian Defense Ministry said a research rocket was fired from the civilian Andoya Rocket Range on Andoya, an island off northern Norway, but with a trajectory to the northwest — away from Russia. It was reported to have landed as planned in the Arctic Ocean near Norway's Svalbard Islands.

"We are a little puzzled by the report," said spokesman Erik Ianke.

Valery Grishin, a Russian government spokesman, said Norwegian authorities had fully informed Moscow of the launch of a weather research rocket.

"The rocket fell on its own — no one shot it down," Grishin said.

The four-stage research rocket Black Brent XXII, was part of NASA project and carried ins ments from American and wegian universities to stu Northern Lights. The range said the rocke some 1,000 miles away sia.

Its "nothing but standing," said Y sia's ambassado

PD 1-26-

Norway missile sets off panic across Europe

Moscow set off an international panic Wednesday when a Russian news agency said defense forces had shot down a Norwegian "combat missile".

▶ Nervous NATO officials scrambled for more information.

▶ European governments summoned Russian diplomats to explain.

The "missile" turned out to be a NASA-funded rocket launched by Norway, within its territory, to study the northern lights. Norway said Moscow had been told beforehand.

Russian officials later acknowledged an error, saying their nerves were on edge over the fighting in Chechnya.

"The rocket fell on its own," said government spokesman Valery Grishin. "No one shot it down."

But tell that to Interfax news agency. Late in the day, editors still theorized the rocket might be for clandestine purposes.

— *Jack Kelley*

USA Today 1-26-

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RLD BRIEFS

ltsin vaps chief Chechen campaign

FROM WIRE REPORTS

MOSCOW — The military command was shaken up yesterday when President Boris Yeltsin's Security Council removed a hard-line minister as coordinator of the Chechnya campaign and put paramilitary police in charge of the offensive.

While the Security Council declared the military operation in Chechnya effectively completed, fighting raged on in Grozny, with new Russian rocket and artillery bombardments of rebel strongholds in the city's southern districts. Rebels have vowed to continue waging a guerrilla campaign in the separatist republic.

Russian officials said up to 2,000 Chechen militants still were fighting in Grozny while its 80,000 remaining civilians had scarce food and no medical help.

The shakeup in Moscow formally introduced what the Kremlin calls the second stage of the Chechen operation, with an emphasis on peace talks, economic revival and a Moscow-installed government.

Two prominent hawks, Defense Minister Pavel Grachev and Nationalities Minister Nikolai Yegorov, were relieved of their involvement in overseeing the war operation.

Doctor in Zimbabwe